DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 432 520 SO 030 987

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TITLE "Politicized Mothering": Evidence of a Relational and Extended Self-Concept among Culturally Relevant Women Educators.
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, April 19-23, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Behavioral Science Research; Blacks; *Culturally Relevant Education; Educational Research; Females; Feminist Criticism; Qualitative Research; Secondary Education; *Self Concept; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Surveys; *Women Faculty; *World Views
IDENTIFIERS African Americans

ABSTRACT

An exploratory, interview-based qualitative study explored the self-concepts of culturally relevant women teachers. Few studies have taken an explicitly psychological approach toward understanding these teachers and their pedagogy. It was expected that this study would offer insight into how a particular pedagogy might be rooted in a specific psychological world view and not simply in an individual teacher's personal preferences or experiences. Data collection consisted of three rounds of individual life-history interviews with six African American women who taught in northeastern urban junior and high schools. "Purposeful sampling" was engaged in by locating potential participants from the African American members of the social justice, curriculum development, and teacher training organization, "Facing History and Ourselves." Teachers were mixed in age and teaching experience. Analysis employed the Listener's Guide (Brown and Gilligan, 1990), a feminist interpretive tool that approaches interviews as "texts" and directs the researcher to read the texts for the viewpoints or "voices" they contain. The teachers' "voices" did in fact describe aspects of both a relational and an extended or sociocentric self. In their portrayals of the self concepts from which their pedagogy emerged, the women recounted how they saw teaching as a personal and relationship-oriented, rather than strictly professional, activity. In particular, they likened teaching to "mothering" and strove to provide each child in their classrooms with intense care and attention. In addition, they demonstrated an extended self as they evaluated pedagogical decisions in terms of the political consequences for the children they taught. Contains 25 references. (BT)

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"Politicized mothering": Evidence of a relational and extended self-concept among culturally relevant women educators

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

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Introduction

This paper reports on a qualitative study undertaken to explore the self-concepts of culturally relevant women teachers. Most investigations in the literature of culturally relevant teaching have focused on illuminating the pedagogy of such educators. As such, they have identified the particular practices and teaching beliefs of educators who enable disenfranchised students to see school as a poignant challenge to, rather than a unilateral confirmation of, their subordinated social status (see, for example, Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Few if any studies, however, have taken an explicitly psychological approach toward understanding these teachers and their pedagogy. Thus, we do not yet understand how and why it is that they conceptualize education as the "practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994) and teaching as an activity with inescapably political implications. In other words, we have little knowledge about the fundamental beliefs about themselves and their relationship with and responsibilities to others which give rise to their pedagogy. This is an important issue to consider for as Shujaa (1995) reminds us, teaching represents a convergence of cultural identities and ideological commitments. Or, in the words of culturally relevant educator and researcher Lisa Delpit (1995), the problems and promise of contemporary education "lie not in a proliferation of new reform programs but in some basic understandings of who we are and how we are connected to and disconnected from one another" (p. xv).

Theoretical framework

In psychology, the self-concept is proposed as a basic theory or grounding for the self, which individuals create to interpret life events and guide their behavior (Epstein, 1973). Contemporary psychological inquiry offers at least three visions of healthy self-concepts. Each of these visions rests on different assumptions about what constitutes adaptive behavior and a valid worldview.

Throughout this century, traditional investigations have described psychological health in terms of an individual's independence, autonomy, and ability to be "a self-determining agent separated from and opposed to social institutions" (Sampson, 1988, p. 19). Free will and personal choice have been viewed as markers of maturity, since dependence on

others is seen as a psychological liability. This autonomous self is part of our national character and history, and is evident in the rhetoric of being the masters of our destinies, pulling ourselves up by our boostraps, and succeeding through our own efforts. While such a vision of self certainly has its benefits in terms of encouraging independent and even creative thought and action, it also has limitations which only recently have caught the attention of the field.

Such emphasis on decontextualized independence and autonomy has been challenged over the last two decades by feminist psychologists. They have criticized traditional psychology for overlooking the "centrality of relationships" (Gilligan, 1995) in sustaining and developing the self. The traditional bias in psychology, they argue, has also reflected the historical and social equation of humanity in the West with European and North American masculine traits. The amended lens they propose is of a 'relational self' or a self that is defined by its relationships with and responsibilities to other people (Gilligan, 1982; Josselson, 1988). Such a focus on relationships shifts psychological inquiry from a study of individuals independent of history and politics, to an exploration of individuals and the relational contexts in which they develop and achieve self-knowledge.

Pre-existing much of the feminist critique, but receiving less attention, has been the work of cross-cultural psychologists. Like feminists, these researchers and theorists have questioned the validity of the 'traditional' self over the last 30 years. Specifically, however, they maintain that an emphasis on autonomy and distinctiveness represents the cultural and historical specificity of European American societies and thus has limited value in conceptualizing and understanding the psychological realities of people of different ethnicities and cultures (Kondo, 1990; Nobles, 1973; Ward, 1995). Working from a cross-cultural and often an explicitly liberation-minded vantage point, these psychologists have further proposed that both the traditional and relational concepts of self tend to de-emphasize the socio-political contexts of individuals - that is, the historical and economic contexts that essentially shape the very notions of individuality and relatedness that traditional and relational psychology recognize. Thus, these researchers have introduced the concept of an "extended" (Nobles, 1973) or "sociocentric" (Sampson, 1985) self, which by definition is embedded in communities and their collective histories, and is not simply

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created and sustained through dyadic relationships or personal desires and beliefs. In other words, one's sense of a sociocentric self includes relationships and responsibilities that extend to predecessors and future progeny, because the self is conceived as "coming into being as a consequence of that group's being" (Nobles, 1973, p. 23).

> Individual identity is grounded in social interaction, in the life of the community, [so] that an individual's good life is inseparable from the successful functioning of his or her society. (Hord & Lee, 1995, p. 8)

Restated in other words that are relevant to a discussion of teaching, given the preponderance of women in this career, Black lesbian and activist Audre Lorde (1993) writes:

> What woman here is so enamoured of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face?... If I fail to recognize [other women] as other faces of myself, then I am contributing not only to each of their oppression but also to my own.... I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. (pp. 132-133).

As psychologists from traditional, relational, and cross-cultural inquiries have maintained, one's theory or concept of self influences one's sense of what is imaginable, feasible, and desirable in terms of one's interactions with other people. Since schools are social institutions, a teacher's self-concept provides a lens into how that educator sees the problems, responsibilities, and possibilities of teaching and formal education.

Methods and Data

An exploratory, interview-based qualitative study (Beauboeuf, 1997) was undertaken to determine the psychological self-concepts of culturally relevant teachers. I expected this study to offer insight into how a particular pedagogy might be rooted in a specific psychological worldview and not simply in an individual teacher's personal preferences or experiences. Thus, it was hoped that this psychological approach to pedagogy would help uncover a systematic nature to the thinking and behavior of culturally relevant educators.

Data collection consisted of three rounds of individual life-history interviews with six African American women who taught in northeastern urban junior and senior high school classrooms. I engaged in "purposeful sampling" (Patton, 1990) by locating potential participants from the African American members of the social justice, curriculum development, and teacher training organization, Facing History and Ourselves. The teachers studied ranged in age from mid-20s to early 50s, and had between two and 23 years of classroom teaching experience. For analysis of the interviews, I employed the Listener's guide (Brown & Gilligan, 1990), a feminist interpretive tool which approaches interviews as "texts" and directs the researcher to read the texts for the different viewpoints or "voices" they contain.

Findings

As I 'listened' to the voices in the interview transcripts, I found that the teachers did in fact describe aspects of both a relational and an extended or sociocentric self. In their portrayals of the self-concepts from which their pedagogy emerged, the women recounted how they saw teaching as a personal and relationship-oriented, rather than strictly professional, activity. In particular, the teachers likened teaching to 'mothering.' In so doing, they strove to provide each child in their classrooms with intense care and attention. In the words of Michelle, a high school history teacher in her mid-20s,

> You can tell a good teacher, because they keep talking about 'my kids,' you know [chuckle]. And I'm not trying to say that I'm a good teacher - I think I was good - but part of that is that passion. And saying 'my kids' means that when they walk through that door, you're accepting the responsibility that for the next nine months, what happens in your classroom, and what happens to those children is what you do with them. And you've a got a precious life there. And if you mess it up, you're not just messing up a grade here or a grade there, that you're messing up a life. And that's an enormous responsibility.

In addition, the teachers of this study demonstrated an extended self as they evaluated pedagogical decisions in terms of the political consequences for the children they taught. Natalie is a history teacher in her mid-40s who grew up in the segregated South. About tracking, she says the following:

> I have teachers who have approached me and say, "Well, we want to put this group of children together, because this other group is creating problems," so that in essence they want to track the students.... And I have some real problems with tracking. I mean, I can understand its benefits on the one hand, but then in terms of the social ramifications, in terms of how children feel about themselves, it's diminished, when you put them, segregate them, you know, into groups.

One key reason for this "political clarity" (Bartolome, 1994) appears to be the way in which the teachers saw themselves as historical beings shaped by political changes. Natalie explains why she fails the embrace the 'expedience' of tracking:

> Having a political understanding of the nature of this capitalist society that we live in, that helps me to put things in perspective. And I think if you're missing that piece, then you will tend to blame the children or the families themselves, and just sort of give up hope on them.... But if you know that there's a possibility of change, [you will have hope]. And I do believe in change because ... I was born in '54. I'm a product of that period, Brown v. Board of Education. And, I see some change, though there's a lot more that has to take place, obviously, you know. (emphasis added)

Lastly the teachers referred to teaching as a moral undertaking to which they had been "called." Cynthia, a communications teacher in her early 20s, comments on this aspect of her profession:

> This idea that we were created in the image of God -- I think that's a really provocative thing that suggests so much, and puts such a responsibility on mankind. And that's to manifest the divinity within you. And that means for me ... I want to develop a kindness and a love and a patience ... [a] level of understanding, of humility, of groundedness, of goodness.... I think that's what a human being is.... I think that there's something really spiritual about being an educator, because I think the only reason to learn is to teach. I mean, why else would you learn? To harbor all this information? It's to teach!

Significantly, evidence of a traditional self only exists in the teachers' descriptions of standard teaching, which they see as problematically disconnected from social responsibility and the requisite caring for students as children. Natalie describes some of her colleagues as "there, just because it's a job. They really do not have those children's

interest at heart." Patricia, a junior high school English teacher in her mid-40s, is more understanding of why some teachers don't care, but she is even more adamant that despite the pressures of teaching, one must not allow hassles from administrators and "irate and unjustified" parents to

> decrease the quality of my helping. The quality of my mediating. The quality of my nurturing.... This is what most teachers succumb, to, the pressures from every aspect, you know, pummeling you, to the point that you're just really almost beat senseless. You can no longer sense and care.... Some people jog and everything is released. Other people meditate or whatever. But you have to get this stuff off.... Because sometimes you might be the only person that is consistently saying, 'You're gonna produce. I care. You can do the work. You can do the work. You're gonna do it.'

For the educators of this study, teaching is likened to parenting or a process of "extending, sharing, shaping [through which] you get of sense of who your students are." It requires teachers to become surrogate parents in order "to come in and help meet the needs [of an individual] because the person, any individual is so complex, so diverse." It's also about helping students "become literate in their society and how they need to prepare themselves."

Finally, teaching, as conceptualized by these women, is an undertaking that works because educators "care for" their students so that they can "take care" of themselves. Sylvia, a special educator in her early 40s, distinguishes between these two forms of caring:

> When you 'care for' someone, you help them, you nurture them and support them, and sort of help them to figure out things. And I think when you 'take care of' someone, sometimes you want to do that for them. You want to solve it for them.

The reason behind helping students to become problem solvers, and not just passive recipients of assistance, is that as educators, these women want to prepare their students for "what[ever] they can hope and dream [for themselves]." In the words of Andrea, an art teacher:

> I'm not preparing students to go off, to leave here, then go to art school. I think of myself as, 'When they leave me, they're going on to be whatever they're deemed to be, and part of my job is to help them discover what that is.'

As a result of their extended and relational views of themselves as teachers, these women generally cannot understand "how you can think about teaching and not think about your moral responsibility for children. And your responsibility to help them grow physically, emotionally, and spiritually."

Discussion

By demonstrating maternal, political, and ethical motivations in their teaching, the women of this study effectively made their pedagogy relevant to the relational and political needs of their disenfranchised students. The women essentially 'related' and 'extended' the traditional concept of teacher to the concerns and responsibilities that were important to them. This finding supports Madeleine Grumet's (1988) contention that "dominated by kits and dittos, increasingly mechanized and impersonal, most of our classrooms cannot sustain human relationships of sufficient intimacy to support the risks, the trust, and the expression that learning requires" (p. 56; emphasis added).

Consequently, I coined the term 'politicized mothering' to draw attention to how the teachers' pedagogy seeks to be in squarely relationship with both students and the political and moral implications of educating young people. For these women, being a good teacher meant exposing "other people's children" to academic rigor in a supportive environment. The motif of mothering reframes what is commonly seen as a private and exclusive relationship (Grumet, 1988; Casey, 1993) into a template for teaching all children as if they were one's own. The political awareness of the educators allows them to recognize the power of their work to shape how disenfranchised children come to see themselves and their possibilities. Finally, the ethical beliefs that the teachers bring to teaching move them beyond the "ethic or despair" that is common in education to adopt an "ethic of risk" (Welch, 1990), with which they can see their actions as contributing to the ongoing, multifaceted, and communal struggle against injustice. In the words of feminist theologian, Sharon Welch (1990):

> The fundamental risk constitutive of this ethic [of risk] is the decision to care and act although there are no guarantees of success. Such action requires immense daring and enables deep joy. It is an ethos in sharp contrast to the ethos of cynicism that often accompanies a recognition of the depth and persistence of evil....

> [T]he creation of fairness is the task of generations, [and the] work for justice is not incidental to one's life but is an essential aspect of affirming the delight and wonder of being alive. (pp. 68, 70)

Thus, these culturally relevant educators are dynamic agents for social justice, precisely because they define themselves out of a sense of connection with and responsibility to the human struggle for freedom and justice. It is from this definition of self that is simultaneously relational and extended that they maintain confidence in their efforts, despite the slow pace of social change. As Cynthia relates,

> To suggest 'I'm going to change you,' is to suggest, 'I know everything, and I have the right answer.'... People aren't victories. It's about, 'So, what have you got to tell me? So let's talk for awhile, let's keep the conversations going, and maybe we'll both be changed by the end of this'.... [Change] is increments. It's little steps. And I value the process.... It's the process through which we go that's often the time during which you learn the most.

Concluding remarks and implications

Teacher-educator Marilyn Cochran-Smith (1995) suggests that educational reform is essentially and profoundly a psychological task of "rewriting autobiography." She has found that most pre-service teachers have not deeply understood the extent to which race has affected their lives. It is her belief that reconstructing knowledge of the self in light of a new understanding of our racialized society will best equip them for being advocates of students. In other words, how we know ourselves has significant implications for how well we can come to know and understand others, particularly people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

In light of Cochran-Smith's assertions about narrative, pedagogy, and self-concept, the findings of this study have several implications for school reform and multiculturalism. For example, the existence of relational and extended self-concepts among culturally relevant teachers suggests that attention must be focused on the specific self-concepts used by pre- and in-service teachers as they "author" their life stories. Specifically, a traditional self-concept seems to compromise an educator's ability to envision and undertake social justice as a pedagogical goal. Because one defines one's self as autonomous, one may resent the so-called "nonacademic" or "caretaking" aspects of teaching and focus on how one

can extricate oneself from students. Such an autonomous teaching self may in fact be implied or prescribed by schools of education. At least in the mind of Natalie, "teachers would love to be able to come and teach their craft, and just do that, I mean, because that's what we went to college for." Unless schools of education encourage and model teaching against the grain (Cochran-Smith, 1993), teaching may well become "just a job."

Moreover, the existence of <u>both</u> relational and extended selves in the self-concepts of the women of this study indicates that being a culturally relevant educator entails more than simply having a professed love of children. Teachers who only recognize a relational self-concept may fail to evaluate their actions in light of the historical and contemporary existence of social injustice. Thus, out of a desire to shelter children from these 'harsh' realities, they may in fact adopt a "savior" attitude through which they severely compromise their students' ability to face, understand, and overcome those exact barriers. As Cynthia warns:

> We're all subject to the stereotypes of our society, and we can't assume that because we're well intended, [that] we don't carry with us all of that. You know that sheltering, 'Don't teach them that history,' Or, 'Don't tell them that.' Or, 'I feel so sorry for you. I <u>expect</u> you to be poor. I know you only have one parent. Your mother probably don't know how to be a mother' [all said in a gentle, condescending voice]. Hey, you've got to help them see within their own situation the strength and the richness....

Finally, this study compels us to consider the role of school environments in encouraging particular self-concepts among those who teach. It seems possible that schools which silence discussions of race and inequity, and which are continuing the 19th century program of "domesticating" women teachers (Spring, 1994) may predispose such educators to develop a traditional, or at best relational, self-concepts. Doing so would advance the sense that schools are not political places and that the problems students experience are solely of their own creation. Conversely, schooling environments that stress and model interdependence and the moral value of each human life may encourage teachers to 'extend their selves.' It is my hope that pursuing these lines of inquiry in future research will help us to become more responsive to the psychological aspects of educating all children as if they were our own.

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